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ABSTRACT

School administrators can learn how to take decisive and positive action in dealing with the grief and the emotional reactions of students and staff members in the event of a tragedy. Guidelines for dealing with tragedy can be implemented in most schools. An individual student affected by a tragedy should be informed quietly, simply, and directly by an authority figure in a private surrounding and accompanied by a person close to the student. The student's teacher should be informed of the circumstances. When the entire school community is affected by a tragedy, the chief school administrator should make an announcement to the entire student body and then have one or more persons go to each class and discuss the meaning and effect of the loss, and answer questions. If a memorial is planned, students should be encouraged to take an active part in the project. Staff workshops should be scheduled before a tragedy occurs so that teachers can see what feelings and experiences of their own might help or complicate the situation. A profile to help parents and professionals identify potential teenage suicide victims is provided. (MLF)

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Tips for Principals from NASSP December 1986

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How To Handle Death in the School

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How To Handle Death in the School

Educational leaders believe they are prepared for every possible situation and/or crisis. They attend seminars and workshops dealing with teacher strikes, budget defeats, legal action, media invasions, declining enrollments, and AIDS. They review the literature and professional journals on how to cope with low test scores, an "aging" faculty, and shrinking budgets.

But what do they do when a space shuttle containing the first teacher in space suddenly explodes while students watch?

How does a principal face 1,200 students in a high school and tell them that four popular seniors were killed in an automobile accident the night before?

What does a principal do when parents want his or her help in informing a 17-year-old that her brother was killed in an accident?

What words or actions can the administration provide for the students and staff of his or her school when a popular teacher dies?

Through workshops and inservice programs, school administrators can learn how to take decisive and positive action in dealing with the grief and the emotional reaction of students and staff members.

When one considers that each year 1 out of every 750 young people will die or be killed, the urgency of establishing a procedure for informing students of "bad news" becomes obvious. Young people are looking for models or standards for their behavior in times of grief and, as in the case of many other social and emotional situations, it is the educational system that must often supply the "solution."

The school leader also has the responsibility to demonstrate that, while our losses may be tragic, personal, and devastating, "life must go on."

If educators wait until the tragedy occurs, they are forced to decide what to do, or how to do it, in the face of time pressures and highly charged emotions. But, as most would agree, an ounce of prevention can curtail a pound of negative consequences.

The following are guidelines that can be implemented in most schools.

Guidelines for Informing an Individual Student

- The student should be told by someone whom he or she trusts and sees as an authority figure. The principal is often the logical choice.
- Someone who is close to the student (teacher, nurse, counselor, or fellow student) should be asked to remain with the student after he or she receives the news.
- The student should be taken to a place where he or she will have *privacy* and can remain and rest after receiving the news. The student should be able to sit or to lie down if necessary. (The nurse's office meets both of these requirements in most schools.)
- The student should be told what has happened quietly, simply, and directly. Platitudes or religious symbolism should be avoided. Unnecessary details should not be offered but all questions must be answered directly and honestly. One should not be afraid to speak about feelings and emotions; it can help the student to sort out confusing reactions and to see the school in a supporting role (even at a later date). The wishes of the family should be respected as much as possible.
- After the student has been told the news, he or she may have any number of reactions. Remember that there is no one "correct" response.
- Physical contact with the student may have a calming effect, but not all students will want this. If the student wishes to merely sit, his or her wishes should be respected. However, the student should not be left alone.
- If the student remains silent, inform him or her that it is all right to express how he or she feels.
- All the student's teachers should be informed of the circumstances as soon as possible.

Guidelines for Dealing with "Community Grief"

Most of the points listed above are intended for interaction with an individual and will be of little value when the entire school community is affected. The sheer numbers of affected students would make it impossible for the individual needs of everyone to be addressed by a single person. Such a traumatic situation requires the cooperation of all school personnel.

The following guidelines reflect one approach to this type of situation:

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- The chief school administrator makes an announcement to the entire student body. The students are instructed to remain in their classes and are told that they will receive more information shortly. Teachers and aides should be aware that this directive requires everyone to cooperate and may require students to stay in their classes beyond what would normally be the end of the class period.
- One or more persons will then go to each class and convey the news of the event. All available information should be given in a calm, direct manner. The person conveying the information can then answer questions or allow time to discuss feelings and reactions.

During this time, the person may discuss the meaning and effects of this loss, answer student questions about funeral etiquette, or help the class decide if they want to have some observance as a class. (This observance may consist of helping to meet some of the immediate needs of the deceased's family.)

- When all classes have been informed, a follow-up, schoolwide announcement will be made. It may be appropriate to observe a moment of silence if there has been a loss of life.
- If a memorial is planned in the school, students should be allowed and encouraged to take an active part in the planning.

Since faculty members play such an important part in all of this, staff workshops should be scheduled before a tragedy occurs so that teachers can see what feelings and experiences of their own might help or complicate the situation. Working with staff and students after a tragedy is not impossible, but the process of "psychic annulment" makes helping them more difficult.

While dealing with death and grief is never pleasant, the astute administrator must be prepared. This preparation can reduce the intensity of the situation, eliminate the possibility of a faux pas, and demonstrate administrative leadership.

Written by Robert G. Stevenson, social studies teacher, and Harry L. Powers, principal at River Dell Senior High School, Oradell, N.J.

How To Fight Teenage Suicide: Guide to the Danger Signals

Suicidal behavior among teenagers can be spotted in time, according to physicians at the University of Michigan Medical Center.

They have developed and successfully tested a profile to help parents and professionals identify potential teenage suicide victims.

Dr. Norman Alessi, who is assistant professor of psychiatry at the U-M Medical Center and director of the Child and Adolescent Affective Disorders Program at the U-M Medical Center, and Dr. Douglas R. Robbins, former assistant professor of psychiatry at the U-M Medical Center, developed their suicide profile from a study of 27 males and 37 female teens who were hospitalized at the U-M Medical Center's Children's Psychiatric Hospital.

Examples of important clues to watch for are depressed mood, anhedonia (lack of a sense of pleasure), social withdrawal, decreased performance in school, and a noticeable increase in substance use.

The researchers found that the combination of a depressed mood with drug or alcohol abuse is the deadliest combination.

In his research, Alessi found two general types of suicidal teens. One is the teen who seems to be doing well with friends, in school, and in the other areas of his life, then undergoes a marked change. School performance falls, personal hygiene decreases, he or she withdraws socially, has problems sleeping, and begins losing weight.

"Many of these teens have a biological disposition favoring suicide," Alessi said. "A chemical imbalance develops in the brain. Usually there is a history of depression, alcoholism, and suicide in their families. Some of these people are being treated now with drugs to help restore the chemical imbalance, but much more research is needed to effectively help these people, who are considered biological time bombs."

The second type of suicidal teen is one who has not done well in school. This teen is found on the fringe of social activities and may have a learning disability. "People around them usually see this teen as a loser, not as an accepted person," Alessi said. "This teen feels tremendous despair because he begins defining himself according to how others see him. This teen also seems to have a higher potential for suicide."

For more information contact the University of Michigan Medical Center, Health News Service, 300 N. Ingalls, NI5E06, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48109-2007.

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